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Foot-Dragging on Chemical Wastes

Poisonous chemical wastes may be threatening human and animal life at thousands of dumping sites across the country. Yet, as we reported earlier, Environmental Protection Agency brass have quietly ordered their subordinates to stop actively searching for the deadly dumping grounds, which are contaminating soil and underground water in dozens of communities.

Industry has been dumping deadly chemical wastes for decades with reckless disregard for the homes, schools and water supplies they may be endangering. But EPA, with President Carter's budget-cutters chewing on its ankle, has cut back on its investigative action.

Those who will suffer the most are people who live near the chemical dumps. A frightening example is the tiny rural community of Medon, Tenn., 80 miles east of Memphis. Here is how one family has been affected.

In 1964 the Velsicol Chemical Co. built a pesticide disposal dump in Medon. A year later, 23-year-old Woodrow Sterling and his wife, Christine, built a home half a mile from the dump. For eight years, Velsicol dumped toxic chemicals there—more than 250,000 55-gallon drums of poison.

As early as 1967 there was evidence of groundwater contamination, and in 1972 the state ordered the dump closed. None of the families in the area was warned of the potential danger.

Thirteen months ago, Sterling noticed that the water was taking on a "kerosene" smell. His ailing father-in-

law was advised by doctors to drink "all the water he could." Shortly afterward he became totally disabled. Mrs. Sterling's sister-in-law gave birth prematurely, and her baby was deformed. In both cases, authorities say there is no direct link to the water but the possibility cannot be discounted.

Last March the Sterlings and their neighbors were told not to drink the water, but that it was okay to use it for bathing and washing clothes. EPA tests completed in August showed that the Sterlings' well had 2,400 times as much carbon tetrachloride as is considered safe for factory workers to be exposed to.

But the Sterlings didn't learn about the danger until late October at hearings conducted by Rep. Albert Gore Jr. (D-Tenn.). In fact, Mrs. Sterling related that she "took a nice warm bath" the morning she left for Washington. EPA said it was the state's responsibility to warn the Sterlings; state officials said it was EPA's.

Meanwhile, the Sterlings wake up mornings with severe headaches; guests go away with burning eyes and nostrils.

Until recently, Velsicol denied that its dump was causing pollution. Now, however, it has replaced the plumbing in affected homes and provided for fresh water while cash payments for damages are being negotiated. The Sterlings' neighbors have filed a \$2.5 billion damage suit against the company.

After the Gore hearings, an EPA official privately apologized to the Sterlings "for the inconvenience this has

caused you." Meanwhile, sources told our associates Tony Capaccio and Jack Mitchell that the regulations EPA is slowly formulating are being kept loose, to save money by avoiding enforcement action against offending companies.

Government Runaround—Last March we reported that some members of Congress were interested in a new invention that could cut the energy consumed by fluorescent lights as much as 40 percent. The device adjusts the amount of current used according to the amount of sunlight.

The sensor is easy to install, and its inventor, Don Widmayer, estimates it could save \$2 billion in oil imports annually if installed nationwide. Sen. Carl Curtis (R-Neb.) urged the General Services Administration to check the device and consider putting it in all federal office buildings. Nine months later, GSA has done nothing.

The agency, which has lost millions of dollars through fraud and theft, said it couldn't afford the \$12,000 necessary for a test. Widmayer took his invention to the Environmental Protection Agency, which found it worthwhile. But GSA refused permission for EPA tests.

Widmayer also went to the Department of Energy, and after months of wrangling, testing has begun.

While the government was fiddle-faddling, the United Virginia Bank quietly tested Widmayer's invention. Preliminary results, a bank official told us, are promising. "We see this as a coming thing," the official told us.